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AUTHOR Sutherland, Frankie
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ABSTRACT

A study was done to determine teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of a good school climate. A questionnaire, "Teacher Perception Scale" was given to all 150 teachers in a school district, consisting of four elementary schools and one junior high school, in the south suburban area of Chicago (Illinois). Fifty-one randomly slected questionnaires were studied. The majority of teachers agreed that the characteristics of favorable school climate, such as respect, trust, nurturing and caring, high morale, and academic development, are present in their schools. Eighty-two percent liked the school in which they work. Sixty-six percent trusted the people with whom they work. Eighty-four percent of the teachers agreed that they know a lot about the school in which they work. Seventy percent felt that they were a part of the school in which they work. Teacher comments supported the questionnaire items concerning teachers' perceptions of school climate. Results are analyzed by gender and years of teaching experience. The study concludes that respondents have an attitudinal receptiveness to improving the organization in which they work, and therefore school districts should move forward in school reform efforts. (Contains 15 references.) (JDD)

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Frankie Sutherland

Chicago State University

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Teachers' Perceptions of School Climate

Frankie Sutherland

The history of public schools has been a gradual unfolding of theoretical practices all based on the assumption that education would be improved by their implementation. From the early days of teaching reading to learn the Bible, to current concerns about global competition, educators are still searching for those elements that make quality schools. Today, providing quality education for students has become of such concern that schools have become a focal point in many aspects of society.

Special concerns have developed around schools that are located in low socioeconomic areas. A steady decline in the general economy of the inner cities brought abrupt attention to the rapid deterioration of the public schools. Many schools were found to be in crisis in providing quality education.

School climate has been identified as an important component of the schools. Though not easily defined, a favorable school climate is easily recognizable. In quality schools staff and students care for, respect and trust each other. Morale is high and social and academic growth are continuous. School climate may be defined as those qualities that effect the attitudes, behaviors and achievement of the people involved in its operation be they staff, parents or community members (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990).

Brookover et. al. (1979) found that some of the schools in economically depressed areas were providing quality education. This discovery served to rule out some previous notions that students achievement could be explained by family background or individual characteristics of the student.

In looking at these schools that work, educators and researchers have found that school climate effects teacher perception of the school and teacher perception of the school culture effects their relationship with the students and with their job performance Lezotte, (1980).

Although there is a large amount of research about the characteristics that create a quality school climate, little research can be found on teachers' opinions of quality school climate. Teachers are the ones who are most directly involved in educating students, therefore, it is vital that their views be represented in the research findings. An appropriate school climate is essential if teachers are to maximize their skills which, in turn, maximizes the learning experience of all students.

In his description of the role of the principal as instructional leader, Buffie (1989) pointed out that a positive learning environment, good teacher morale, and high student achievement are essentials for a positive school climate. Brookover (1980) observed that schools with favorable learning climates have high achievement regardless of the type of community served

by the school. On the other hand, ineffective school climates are associated with low levels of achievement. In their analysis of ninety one elementary schools in Michigan, Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer and Wisenbaker (1979) found that the school learning climate explained as much of the achievement differences among schools as did the socioeconomic status and race.

Hoy and Woodfolk (1993) did a study of teacher efficacy and aspects of a healthy school climate. Their definition of teacher efficacy was, their belief in their ability to have a positive effect on student learning. The sample was composed of 179 teachers randomly selected from thirty-seven elementary schools in New Jersey. A teacher efficacy scale and a version of the Organizational Health Inventory were administered to the teachers. They found that a healthy school climate was conducive to the development of teachers' beliefs that they could influence student learning. Teachers' confidence that they could reach students was supported by those organizational factors such as trust, respect, and caring that helped them to teach students.

In an attempt to give meaning to the phrase school climate, Hoy and Forsyth (1986), referred to climate as school health. They described a healthy school as one in which harmony pervades relationships among students, teachers and administrators as the organization directs itself toward its mission. Healthy schools appear to be high achieving schools. They are characterized by collegial relations, high academic expectations and teachers' beliefs in their ability to help students.

National Association of Elementary School Principals (1990) listed six areas as the essential ingredients of an effective school climate:

- A caring atmosphere permeates the school. Feelings, concerns and conflicts receive fair and consistent attention.
- Respect for individual differences among staff, students, parents and administrators is demonstrated.
- The trust level is high. The principal respects the teachers' judgment and includes them in school based decisions. The teachers are given appropriate classroom autonomy.
- The morale in the schools is high. The students are enthusiastic about learning, and the teachers are excited about teaching. Achievements and contributions by everyone in the school are acknowledged and celebrated.
- Social development is emphasized. Good citizenship and a written code of behavior has been developed through collaborative efforts of parents, schools and students.
- Academic development is the primary concern to the students and staff. Learning is constantly celebrated (p.18)

Monteith (1989) reviewed a study Cook (1989) which involved fifty-

eight randomly selected elementary schools in South Carolina. Cook used the Organizational Climate Perception Questionnaire to measure climate in the schools. The instrument contained eight school climate subscales. The subscale scores resulted in six climate profiles which ranged from openness/functional on one end to closedness/rigidity on the other. Analysis showed that forty-five schools (77.6%) fell into the closed profile. No schools were characterized as having open climates. One school (1.7%) had a paternal climate, six schools (10.3%) had an autonomous climate, six (10.3%) had a controlled climate.

Monteith (1989) suggested that rigid adherence to a new curriculum mandated by the state in some part encouraged perceptions of such a closed climate. Teachers felt that they lost their autonomy in the classroom. They felt they had been deskilled through loss of discretion and demoralized by the rigid requirements that were imposed from the top. A general climate of distrust was created as a result of the state mandates which were imposed.

In reviewing several theories about climate Goodell (1992) concluded that as a psychological construct, climate is measured by individuals perceptions of climate. As an organizational level construct, climate is measured by consensus or shared agreement about climate. She suggested that climate is intersubjective in that it is determined by organizational changes which effects the entire group, as well as the individuals' perceptions of their environments. Because many elements are involved in creating climate, defining the climate of an organization is a complex assignment and so is writing a prescription for a desired school climate.

A similar viewpoint of the school climate is the consideration of two entities that are interdependent and form the learning environment. These two entities are school culture and school climate DeRoche (1987). He contends that the school culture is its organizational health, its safety and orderliness, its rites, rituals and regulations and so on. The school culture is the foundation, the supports that hold the organization together. The culture evolves over time and involves a shared mission by the individuals in the organization. Improvement in the school culture requires intensive and deliberate effort because all elements of the organization must be taken into account.

On the other hand, the capability to change the climate is immediately available because climate is in the classroom. The student's feelings of safety, respect, belonging and ease can be realized by the efforts of the teacher to create such a climate.

It is the interplay of the school culture and school climate that creates the overall learning environment.

Davidson (1987) in a study of twenty schools of the Chicago Effective Schools Project found that fifty nine percent of the teachers surveyed reported that climate/discipline was an issue in their schools. This is not an expected finding in effective schools which the researcher suggests probably indicates the need for some internal adjustments in the organizational structure.

Seever (1991) in a study of Paige Classical Greek Magnet Elementary School in Kansas City, Missouri which emphasizes a Greek and physical

philosophy toward education, found that although over half the reading, math, science and social studies standardized test scores were above the district and national levels, seventy seven percent of the teachers felt that the school climate was not good. The study found that most teachers did not think the climate of the school was good and pointed to the need for better school administration and communication by the principal.

Research indicates that the school climate does make a difference in the achievement levels of students. Several characteristics have been identified and found present in the climates of effective schools. Almost all of the reviewed studies point to these very similar characteristics. The most important of these characteristics is the teachers' roles in determining the nature of the learning environment. It is because of this that the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize a school can be created. It is because of the teachers' perceptions of the school climate that change in the school climate is possible. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of a good school climate as indicated in the current research.

Procedure

This study includes fifty-one randomly selected questionnaires selected from the population of 150 teachers.

A questionnaire entitled "Teacher Perception Scale" was used to measure teachers' perceptions of the school climates in which they worked.

The questionnaire was given to all teachers in School District 147 in the south suburban area of Chicago. The district consists of four elementary schools and one junior high school. There are a total of 150 teachers in the district.

The Teacher Perception Scale was distributed at the year-end teachers' meeting. A cover letter explained the purpose of the study and the procedure for completing the scale. The TPS was collected the same day.

The results of the questionnaire were tabulated. The percentages of agree, disagree and no opinion were analyzed to determine the teachers' perceptions of the school climate. The Chi-Square was used to determine the statistical significance (.05) of the responses.

Findings

The data in Table 1 show that the majority of the teachers agree that the characteristics of favorable school climate as described in the current research are present in their schools. In the area of the teachers overall attitude toward the school, eighty-two percent (.05) agreed that they like the school in which they work.

In the area of trustworthiness of colleagues sixty-six percent (.05) agreed that they trust the people with whom they work. Trustworthiness is

a characteristic which current research has found in effective schools.

Communication is an important aspect in creating an effective school climate. Communication is used to help people within the organization clarify their understanding of the organization's goals, objectives, procedures and rules. In this area of the survey, eighty-four percent (.05) of the teachers agreed that they know a lot about the school in which they work. This implication suggests that the majority of the teachers agree that information about their school is shared and communication practices are acceptable to them.

The final area of the survey addressed the characteristics of belonging. Seventy percent (.05) of the teachers agreed to the statement, "I feel that I am a part of the school in which I work."

Responses to the comments section of the survey further supports the teachers' agreement that their schools have those characteristics which are found in effective schools. They are:

1. I commend the job that the principal and teachers are doing in the school. The unity in the school is commendable.

2. Overall, the faculty of all schools in district 147 carry and conduct themselves in a manner that befits their profession,

3. The school where I work is highly organized and communication with the administration is open and explicit. The weekly bulletins, info-talk, school activity calendar, and meetings keep everyone abreast of what's going on.

4. I like the caring and nurturing of my co-workers.

5. I feel that the staff in 147 is a good one. We have problems in other areas in the district but overall I feel that the atmosphere is good.
6. The majority of the staff at my school are considerate and professional.

7. I respect the administrators and co-workers at my school.

8. At my school everyone tries to work together and get along.

9. We really try to put the needs of the students first at my school.

10. Our administrator tries to be firm in dealing with the staff.

Table I

N=51 Responses to Teacher Perception Survey

A. Agree B. Disagree C. No Opinion

		A	B	C
1.	I know a lot about the school in which I work.	84%*	3%	9%
2.	I have a great deal of respect for the school in which I work.	76%*	11%	11%
3.	I feel a great sense of pride in the school in which I work.	73%*	13%	13%
4.	I feel the school in which I work is nurturing and caring.	69%*	13%	17%
5.	I like the school in which I work.	82%*	5%	11%
6.	I participate in the things that go on at the school in which I work.	84%*	9%	2%
7.	I understand well what goes on at the school in which I work.	69%*	21%	9%
8.	I feel that I am part of the school in which I work.	70%*	19%	9%
9.	I trust the people at the school in which I work.	66%*	11%	19%
10.	I am encouraged to be a part of what goes on in my school.	57%*	21%	13%

*Significant at .05 level.

Table II

Percentages of Responses to Question:

Teachers' perceptions of school climate

	Male			Female		
Statement	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
1. I know a lot about the school in which I work.	80%*		20%	78%*	11%	11%
2. I feel the school in which I work is caring and nurturing.	100%*			63%*	15%	21%
3. I like the school in which I work.	100%*			82%*	6%	11%
4. I feel that I am part of what goes on at the school in which I work.	80%*		20%	63%*	21%	15%

*Significant at the .05 level.

The data were examined by the responses given by the five males and forty six females. The four statements were taken from each of the four areas of the survey.

The implications of the data in table two may reflect the unbalanced gender makeup of the school district. Females outnumber males over 2 to 1. In some of the comment areas of the survey, teachers suggested that their be more males hired in the district. Males in the school district often perform duties in areas other than their own classrooms. Many teachers show their gratitude for this assistance by verbally expressing their appreciation to the males in their schools. Perhaps such attention to the males might encourage them to feel more favorable toward their schools.

Table III

Responses of Less Experienced and More Experienced Teachers to the Question:

Teachers' perceptions of school climate

Statement	0-5 Years Experience			5 or more Years Experience		
	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
1. I know a lot about the school in which I work.	76%*	9%	14%	86%*	3%	10%
2. I feel the school in which I work is caring and nurturing.	66%*	19%	14%	70%*	10%	20%
3. I like the school in which I work.	76%*	4%	19%	86%*	6%	6%
4. I feel that I am part of what goes on at the school in which I work.	52%*	23%	23%	73%*	16%	10%

*Significant at the .05 level.

The data were examined by the responses given by the twenty one teachers who have less than five years teaching experience and thirty teachers with more than five years teaching experience.

The data might imply that less experienced teachers have less knowledge about the schools in which they work and feel less a part of the schools in which they work which may be the result of their shorter tenure in the schools. Both groups share a very similar degree of perception in the caring and nurturing aspects of the the school.

In summary, teachers had favorable perceptions about their school's climate in the areas that research identified as quality school indicators (respect, trust, nurturing and caring, high morale and academic development).

The ability to successfully change any structural aspects of an organization is related to the attitudes that the employees have about the organization. The results of this study might imply that the members of this organization have an attitudinal receptiveness to improving the organization in which they work. It is therefore suggested that they school district move forward in its efforts toward school reform by addressing some of the other issues that were raised by the teachers in the comment section of the survey.

Since most of the research tended to focus on the characteristics of the quality school climate, further study needs to be done in regards to the teacher's perception of school climate as it relates to instruction which relates to student achievement.

Since this study consisted of a small sample and instrument, it cannot be generalized to all teachers. It is suggested that more studies using larger samples and instruments be used to determine more specifically the relationship between teacher's perception of school climate and what has already been identified as quality school climate. In so doing, some of the guesswork, time and money may be taken out of the process of finding the formula for creating quality school climate which may also enable schools to make needed changes more expeditiously and with greater ease.

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